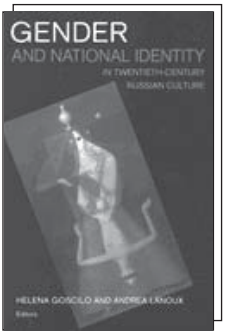
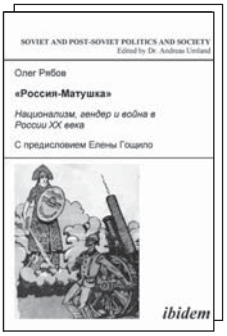


Helena Goscilo and Andrea Lanoux (eds.), *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture***.** De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006



Oleg Riabov, *'Rossiia-Matushka': Natsionalizm, gender i voina v Rossii XX veka. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2007*.

Mother Russia

The above volumes explore connections between constructions of 'gender' and 'the nation' in Russian twentieth-century culture, making a persuasive case for the need to include such an analysis in the understanding of both Soviet and Russian nationalist ideology and practice.

The multi-authored volume edited by Goscilo and Lanoux continues in the wake of Sarah Ashwin's *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* (2000), but focuses specifically on the interweaving of gender and national identity in a variety of cultural media, from film and TV to memorial literature and war songs. For their conceptual framework, Goscilo and Lanoux also look for inspiration to Susan Gal and Gail Kligman's *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (2000), applying to Soviet and post-Soviet Russia the latter study's broad take on gender, family and reproductive politics in socialist and post-socialist East-Central Europe.

Riabov's book is presented as a 'sequel' to his earlier work, which bears a (confusingly) similar title – *'Matushka-Rus'* (2001). The most important conceptual revisions to his former, 'socio-philosophical' analysis of the gendering of national identity in Russia include the introduction of a purportedly more powerful analytic tool – Foucault's notion of 'discourse', and the narrowing of focus onto a more specific historical context – namely, times of war.

Both of the reviewed volumes operate within a similar theoretical and methodological framework. Helena Goscilo is, in fact, the author of the English-language preface to Riabov's book, introducing Western readers to his earlier work as well as to the present volume. Riabov, in turn, makes some use of Goscilo and Lanoux's collection in support of his own analysis, and, if abbreviated, his study could easily have formed one of the chapters in the latter volume.

Both books explore the intersection of gender and national identity primarily in representational and discursive practices. The bulk of their analysis therefore deals, on the one hand, with the way gender tropes are used in (emotively charged) metaphorical representations of the Russian/Soviet state and nation (for example, in wartime propaganda or in intellectual writings on the national question); and, on the other, with the way men and women are portrayed as constituent parts of the Soviet/Russian nation in terms of their distinct (gendered) social roles (for example, in state legislation on the family, in political, artistic or popular representations of 'exemplary' males and females, in debates about demographic problems, in attitudes towards homosexuality, prostitution and abortion, etc.). Following Foucault, both studies imply, of course, that 'discourse' is not limited to the sphere of 'representations', but is inextricably tied to fundamental relations of power in a society and that it therefore directly shapes the lives of actual men and women. However, as exercises in cultural history, both books tend to deal predominantly with the realm of cultural production, symbolic representation and collective imagination.

In both books there is a certain tension between, on the one hand, the classical understanding of gender as a binary polarity (masculine vs. feminine), which is primarily about gender identity, or more precisely, about gender difference and gender power-relations; and, on the other, the strategy of dissolving the problem of gender into a much broader and more complicated question of how the dynamics of particular *social systems of reproduction* structure power-relations in a given society (and, by extension, how reproductive relations, which include questions of gender difference but are not reducible to them, are articulated symbolically and organised institutionally). The metaphor of 'the family', for example, is abundantly analysed in both studies, and is shown as crucial to the figurative linking of gender

and nationhood. It is especially through the hierarchies entailed in particular family models (whether traditional, modern or post-modern), and through the (actual or figurative) incorporation of these models into the wider structures of state and society, that gender relations become part of a more encompassing metaphor of a *social order*, and are then used in figurative representations of 'the nation'.

And yet, since both of the above books emanate from the framework of Gender Studies, gender binarism continues to operate as their 'default point' of analytical reference. In other words, although there is a clear openness to the broadening of the scope of interest to the much wider concern with the social, symbolic and institutional organisation of reproductive systems, in these two studies gender is not fully re-theorised as a *function of reproduction*, or, more precisely, it is not explicitly *subordinated* to the much more complex (non-binary) structure of *reproductive relations* as key to the full understanding of the workings of power in a specific society. As a consequence, most of the analysis in these two books revolves around deconstructing gender stereotypes and critically exploring various 'cults' and 'crises' of masculinity or femininity in Soviet and post-Soviet society.

Nonetheless, one of the virtues of the Goscilo and Lanoux volume lies in the diverse and balanced coverage of gender that it provides, tackling very different aspects of both female and male identities in Russia across the entirety of the twentieth century, as they manifested themselves in different spheres of cultural production. The introduction, penned by the editors and entitled 'Lost in the Myths', articulates the volume's conceptual framework and provides an overarching historical narrative of the changing mythology through which the Russian nation was gendered in the twentieth century – from the traditional union of the Batiushka-Tsar (the patriarchal ruler of the empire-state) with the Matushka-Rus (a motherly embodiment of the nation's soul) to the post-Soviet declining birth-rate and rising prostitution as complementary metaphors for a 'nation in crisis'; from the Bolshevik utopian model of a 'gender-equitable' collaboration of the New Man and the New Woman to the Stalinist USSR as a 'big family' headed by the Father of All Peoples; from the supposed masculinisation of the Communist Party nomenclature to the alleged feminisation of stagnation-era dissidence.

The ten (chronologically-ordered) chapters in this collection cover an extremely wide range of topics. Valentina Zaitseva offers an overview of ways in which national identity is gendered in the Russian language – in everyday usage as well as in the discourse of political propaganda. She places this analysis in the context of some more general 'sexisms' (grammatical and socio-cultural), which cha-

racterise the Russian idiom. Helena Goscilo deconstructs the trope of 'the widow' in Russian literary and memoir writings, focusing especially on its role in simultaneously symbolising national sacrifice and national survival. Elizabeth Jones Hemenway examines the hagiographies of model female Bolsheviks and analyses the place of this memorial literature in the construction of the new Soviet identity in the 1920s. She argues that, despite the rhetoric of gender equality, women revolutionaries continued to be portrayed in terms of traditional images of femininity, especially as mothers and sisters, or as embodiments of the spiritual side of the Revolution, while the utopian ideal of a 'free loving', sexually independent, New Woman remained suppressed.

Two other contributions focus on the Stalin era Lilya Kaganovsky views Nikolai Ekk's 1931 film *Putevka v zhizn'* as an ambiguous narrative of the disciplining of both Soviet masculinity and Soviet nationhood, represented through the transformation of a group of *besprizorniki* into 'new Soviet men' in a Makarenko-style colony. Suzanne Ament refers to the well-documented shift in Stalinist discourse onto traditional family and nationalist values during the Second World War and explores its manifestation specifically in popular war songs, in which she catalogues the (rather predictable) gendered idealisations of Russia and Stalin, as well as of the heroism and sacrifice of 'ordinary' Soviet men and women.

The remainder of the contributions deal with the more recent past. Elena Prokhorova dwells on the crisis of masculinity in the post-Stalin era, which she traces back to the destruction of the traditional family model in the 1920s-30s and to the replacement of the family 'patriarch' institutionally by the state and symbolically by Stalin. She then looks at some ambiguous Brezhnev-era attempts at re-establishing Soviet masculinity in several cult TV series of the 1970s, namely *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*, *Teni ischezaiut v polden* and *Vechnyi zov*. Michele Rivkin-Fish unpicks late-Soviet and post-Soviet discourse on the Russian demographic crisis, offering a useful historical account of the incorporation of this issue in Russian nationalist rhetoric, while exposing the remarkable lack of involvement by women's associations in the reproductive politics of this era. Eliot Borenstein is interested in the image of 'the prostitute', especially during perestroika and the early 1990s, analysing it as a metaphor of 'Russia on sale', in which lie intertwined Russian male anxieties about masculine prowess as well as national pride. Yana Hashamova offers a survey of new cultural constructions of both female and male identities in the Russian cinema of the 1990s, arguing that in post-Soviet films, male identity is represented as far more traumatised and destabilised by the new socio-economic conditions than its female counterpart. She interprets this as a consequence of a certain double-bind of 'patriarchy' – the unnerving

combination of both a dependence on and a distrust of the (Lacanian) symbolic 'Father' which Russian masculinity had to confront after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finally, Luc Beaudoin analyses contemporary constructions of homosexuality in Russia (by homo- and heterosexuals alike), arguing that the latter is still an 'unquantifiable entity', which keeps referring to an idealised 'literary' past, embodied by the Russian Silver Age, while simultaneously remaining highly dependent on Westernised sexual mass-marketing and still very much in search of a 'proud' voice of its own.

Riabov's book covers the same time-frame as the Goscilo and Lanoux's volume. The frame of his analysis is the deconstruction of the image of 'Rossiia-Matushka' as emblematic of the gendered nature of Russian nationalist discourse (both of the 'banal' and of the not so 'banal' kind), although his study ranges well beyond this in scope and ambition.

The first section of Riabov's work is methodological, usefully defining the author's take on some of his key concepts, such as 'discourse' (with reference mostly to Foucault), 'gender' (using the definitions of Joan W. Scott and R. W. Connell) and 'nationalism' (deferring especially to Anthony Smith). This section also offers an informative account of ways in which discourses of nationhood and gender have been historically intertwined in the context of wartime violence.

In the second section Riabov highlights the importance of the strategy of 'gendering' a particular nation *as 'the other'*. Finding inspiration in postcolonial theory (e.g. Edward Said's notion of 'Orientalism' and Stuart Hall's idea of 'The West and the Rest'), Riabov stresses the importance of the gendered 'other-ing' of Russia *by the West*, on which Russia's own gendered self-image appears to be crucially dependent. The third section of Riabov's study is a chronological account of the role of gender stereotypes in Russian nationalist discourse, from the writings of the philosophers of the Silver Age, such as Rozanov and Berdyaev (Riabov's specialty) right up to recent examples of nationalist machismo characteristic of the Putin era. The focus of this section is, however, specifically on the context of war (with individual subsections being devoted to the First World War, the Civil War, the Second World War and the Cold War). Riabov is here not just interested in textual representations but also in visual images, especially those used in propaganda posters or newspaper cartoons. His deconstruction of gender stereotypes from one war to the next is informative and interesting, but the attempt at historical exhaustiveness makes this section somewhat repetitive and the metaphors analysed rather predictable.

This mild criticism on grounds of predictability perhaps ought to be extended to both of the reviewed books. Both studies clearly offer rich analyses of the way in which articulations of gender differences

structure both the Russian nationalist rhetoric and the everyday imagination of Russian national identity. They provide valuable insights into the way Russian identity is gendered both by the Russians themselves and by the West. They reveal the significance of the gendering of nationhood both in extreme and traumatic events, such as war, and in the most trivial of peace-time phenomena, such as popular TV dramas.

And yet, after finishing with the two books, this reviewer could not help continuing to feel still somewhat lost in the mythology of gender stereotypes, and in their endless and ultimately rather tiring cultural recycling from one era to the next. The crucial question that remains open is whether an analysis that thrives on the binary logic of its governing concept is actually capable of dialectically escaping this logic or whether it is doomed to remaining trapped by the very same mythology of binary difference that it seeks to deconstruct.

Andy Byford